

RECORDING REVIEWS

by Dwight Pounds

Boris Pigovat: Requiem “The Holocaust” for Solo Viola and Orchestra.

Donald Maurice, viola, with the Vector Wellington Orchestra, Mark Taddei, conductor.
Atoll ACD 114.

Donald Maurice

For those readers unfamiliar with the featured soloist in this recording, a few introductory words probably are in order. Dr. Donald Maurice, Professor of Music, New Zealand School of Music Wellington, New Zealand, served the International Viola Society in two offices: Executive Secretary and Treasurer. He was host of International Viola Congress XXIX in Wellington in 2001. He holds the IVS Silver Viola Clef and was presented Honorary Membership in the American Viola Society at IVC XXXV in Adelaide, Australia, in 2007. He has performed, lectured, and moderated panel discussions at several international viola congresses, and he is a world-renowned Bartók scholar. His viola instructors comprise a near “who’s who” among twentieth century teaching legends: Nannie Jamieson, Max Rostal, William Primrose, and Donald McInnes.

Likewise, Maurice’s intellectual curiosity has a profoundly creative and eclectic side. He never assumes, for instance, that unconventional media are inappropriate content for a viola composition, as evidenced by IVC premieres (1) for viola and rubbish tin (a.k.a. “trash can”) and (2) viola and steam engine film clip.¹ But lest one conclude that Maurice’s musical taste is directed strictly to the unconventional, he or she need only to consider the performances at Tempe (IVC XXXVI) and Provo (2009 Primrose Memorial Recital) of his transcription for viola of George Enescu’s third sonata for violin and piano, op. 25, listed as *Sonata Op. 25 for Piano and Viola in the Romanian Folk Character* by the publisher, Editions Enoch (France). Though physically and mentally demanding to perform, the work is very effective on viola, a unique musical tour de force that enriches the instrument’s literature both

musically and technically. In it, we as violists gain access to the rich musical heritage of Eastern Europe enjoyed in greater measure by the violin and other instruments.

Boris Pigovat

Boris Pigovat by name is scarcely known to most American violists—or other musicians for that matter. He was born in 1953 in Odessa, USSR, and studied composition at the Gnessin Music Institute (Academy of Music) in Moscow and resided in Tajikistan for eighteen years before immigrating to Israel in 1990. There he further pursued music studies and earned a Ph.D. from Bar-Ilan University in 2002. Among his more prominent compositions: *Musica dolorosa No. 2* (1988), *Massada* (2000), *Wind of Yemen* (2003), *Prayer*, and *Song of the Sea* (both c. 2005), many of which have been performed throughout the world. The topic of this review, *Requiem “The Holocaust” for Viola and Orchestra*, won the 1995 Prize of ACUM (Israeli ASCAP) as did *Song of the Sea* in 2005.

Requiem “The Holocaust” for Viola and Orchestra

Commenting upon the genesis of the *Requiem*, Pigovat wrote in the liner notes:

For years I felt the necessity to write a work dedicated to the Holocaust. After my immigration to Israel I started to consider different ideas for such a work. At first, I wanted to write the Requiem for the standard performing medium (soloists, choir, orchestra and, maybe, narrator). At that time Yuri Gandelman, the principal violist of the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, asked me to write something for him. He was an excellent violist I had known for years—we learned at the same time at Gnessin College and then at Gnessin Institute (Academy of Music). So when he asked for me to write for him a work for viola and symphony orchestra, I suddenly understood—I would write the Requiem for Viola and Symphony Orchestra! I would write the work without the text, without the choir and solo singers, but I would try to save the tragic atmosphere of a traditional Requiem.

Pigovat chose four sections of the traditional Requiem he felt were most suitable to his concept of a tragic concert piece: the *Requiem aeternam*, *Dies Irae*, *Lacrimosa*, and *Lux Eterna*.

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Requiem “The Holocaust” for Viola and Orchestra

Requiem aeternam

Dies Irae

Lacrimosa

Lux Eterna

The recording opens with the *Requiem* in four sections. *Requiem aeternam*, *Dies Irae*, *Lacrimosa*, and *Lux Eterna*, recorded November 9, 2008. Pigovat’s highly programmatic score is the preparation of a very knowledgeable composer whose choice of instruments and combinations is at once creative and appropriate to each of the unfolding sections and the various emotions they depict. Though ever mindful of the solo viola part, even in low range, he is never hesitant to use the full orchestra—including full components of brass, percussion, and a piano—for effect, but does so in a manner in which the orchestra and soloist are never competing with one another for the listener’s attention. These qualities are evident even in the opening measures of part I.

Requiem “The Holocaust” is not music for the faint of heart. The listener is drawn inexorably into the unfolding tragedy by a plaintive theme in the clarinet during the opening bars of *Requiem aeternam*. The clarinet slowly yields to the viola, also plaintive and dark in color, but with a stronger and growing sense of urgency. The trap has been set: the auditorium assumes the figurative aura of a packed boxcar enroute to Babi Yar with the door slammed and locked—there is no escape. Pigovat runs a stylistic gamut from tonal to expressionistic with hints of Berg and Shostakovich as he gradually unfolds his nightmare. Though instrumental throughout, there are times one can hear “Re—qui—em” among the many busy layers of musical texture.

Dies Irae predictably is a day of unspeakable wrath and suggests the full and yet incomprehensible force of the holocaust. The texture is violent, jerky—absolutely chaotic and ridden with “hidden” references to both *Shema Yisrael* and the traditional *Dies Irae*. It is strongly influenced by Vasily Grossman’s novel, *Life and Fate*,

with its scenes of last journeys from trains to gas chambers. Again the viola enjoys full voice, even amid the violence, except when intentionally drowned out by the increasing chaos. Pigovat writes of the conclusion, “The end of *Dies Irae* (3/8) is as if the pulse of a huge heart was made up of a great number of human hearts—this pulse is heard less and less and finally disappears.”

Pigovat’s *Lacrimosa* is a near antithesis to that in Mozart’s *Requiem*. With suggestions of Hindemith and Shostakovich, it is weeping—but with horror, shouts of anger, outrage, and madness in place of tears. The solo violist accompanied only by percussion must give musical language to this accumulative insanity. The natural flow of tears comes only with a two-minute traditional *Lacrimosa* that closes the section. Pigovat’s five-minute opening in the solo viola has to be one of the greatest solo passages ever written for this instrument—I cannot overemphasize this point. Following a distant suggestion of *Shema Yisrael* in the solo horn, the *Lacrimosa* leads *attacca* directly into the final movement.

Before reviewing the *Lux Eterna*, it is instructive to mention that Boris Pigovat was requested to write a piece for viola and piano upon finishing the *Lacrimosa*. With the *Requiem* yet strong in his mind and possibly in need of a respite before facing the *Lux Eterna*, he wrote *Prayer*, the second selection on this album. This work was deeply influenced by the *Requiem* and functioned as a sketch for the *Lux Eterna*.

Lux Eterna, based on the *Prayer* sketch, is sublime in its beauty and a welcome relief from all that has preceded it . . . the boxcar we entered in Part I is no more. Pigovat marks the end of the horror with haunting and uplifting melodies and harmonies—tonal and poignant, with lingering layers of transcendental glory and agony. The *Requiem* concludes as the solo viola intones one final reference to the *Shema Yisrael*.

In a larger sense, whatever postulations I might submit regarding this work are completely irrelevant. Reflecting on the 2008 “Concert of Remembrance” in Wellington, Donald Maurice wrote in a letter to me, “It was a privilege to be part of an occasion at which there were seven ambassadors present and at which the German Ambassador publically offered an apology to the Israeli Ambassador for the atrocities of World War II.”²² Nor

apparently was the soloist himself unaffected—Maurice continued: “The performance was in 2008 but is indelibly etched into my memory. Many people were in tears. I myself said, ‘I must not cry!’” Commenting on the composition’s future and potential for effecting change, he observed, “It needs to be performed often as a reminder of the effects of war and the circumstances that precipitate one culture wanting to dominate or annihilate another.”

Please note that the recording date printed in the liner notes for the *Requiem*, November 8, 2009, is incorrect. *Kristallnacht* occurred on November 9, 1938, and the Wellington Concert of Remembrance was held and this recording made on the seventieth anniversary of this tragic day, November 9, 2008.

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Requiem “The Holocaust” for Viola and Orchestra
Prayer for Viola and Piano
Silent Music for Viola and Harp
Nigun for String Quartet

Completing the album and complementing the *Requiem* musically and emotionally are three small ensemble compositions, each by Boris Pigovat. The very dramatic and tragic *Prayer* was written the same year as the *Lux Eterna* (1994) and in fact shares at least one common theme.

Silent Music, known in Hebrew as *Nerot Neshama* (Candles of the Soul), was written in 1997 in response to a particularly vicious terrorist attack. In *Nigun*, conceived originally for string orchestra, Pigovat’s goal is to give “expression to the tragic spirit which I feel in traditional Jewish music” by giving homage to the style and spiritual atmosphere of ancient tunes, but without quoting traditional melodies.³ Pianist Richard Mapp, harpist Carolyn Mills, and the Dominion String Quartet—all of whom participated with Donald in the three concluding compositions on the album—had done their work masterfully, as had Marc Taddei, the Vector Wellington Orchestra, and most certainly Donald Maurice on the *Requiem “The Holocaust.”*

Once again citing the letter to me, Donald Maurice put himself on the proverbial line: “I am not overstating when I say that I believe this is the most significant work ever written for viola and orchestra. Of course it may take the viola community 5–10 years to catch up with the fact that the Walton and Bartók have been seriously challenged.”

Ever mindful of the potential for excess in passing judgment on a new composition, I likewise must put myself on the same line and in all honesty state that Boris Pigovat’s *Requiem “The Holocaust”* arguably is the most significant composition for viola and orchestra I have heard in at least a decade, possibly longer. What I perceive as a paucity of religious/spiritual music featuring a solo viola has been of personal concern for some time, and therefore I must admit to some possible bias in this regard. That said, it would appear that the Pigovat compositions in this album contribute significantly to filling whatever void might exist in this area. Allow me to add parenthetically, even at the risk of being considered chauvinistic, that the solo viola is the perfect medium for expressing Pigovat’s profound musical thoughts in his *Requiem*.

Will the Pigovat *Requiem “The Holocaust”* indeed challenge the Walton and Bartók concerti? Will ten years be sufficient to answer the question? Possibly ... and possibly not on each count, but whatever time is required, the *Requiem’s* success, like any music, inevitably will be predicated upon the combination of well-prepared performances and astute, receptive audiences. An additional intriguing question: Will Boris Pigovat again write for the viola at this level? Many people will want to know.

Notes

¹ **Chris Cree Brown:** *Piece for Viola and Rubbish Tin* (commissioned in 1982—performed at Guelph IVC, but not a premiere). <http://www.music.canterbury.ac.nz/CCBrownlink/chrispers.htm>

Lissa Meridan: *Tunnel Vision for Viola and Film with Soundtrack* (commissioned in 2006—world premiere at Montreal IVC). <http://sounz.org.nz/works/show/14581>

² Private letter from Donald Maurice to Dwight Pounds, December 10, 2010.

³ Pigovat has also transcribed *Nigun* for solo violin and solo viola, the viola version for and with the assistance of Scott Slapin and dedicated to him. Israeli Music Corporation (IMC) publishes all versions. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4P97-Oiq3k>